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The Case of the Carter Briefing Book

Only a Special Prosecutor Can Clear the Air

Joseph A. Califano Jr.

It may be a tempest in a teapot. But how Ronald Reagan handles the case of the Carter briefing book may be as important as the who, what, when and where of the true facts.

After working in Lyndon Johnson's White House and watching John Kennedy and Jimmy Carter at close range, I know exactly how he feels.

Granted, Carter aides are stirring up the story because they're bitter in defeat, and envious of Reagan's adept maneuvering in Washington compared with their own dismal failure here.

Granted, the press seems hell-bent to relieve the summer doldrums by reporting this story as another Watergate, just the way they keep trying to make El Salvador into Vietnam.

Granted, Democratic politicians are cynically and gleefully attacking the president on the only weak point they've found.

Granted, the press that honors Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein and Seymour Hersh for aggressively getting government documents and tricking news sources into revelation is distinctly hypocritical.

Granted, some of the president's aides have made incredibly dumb and indiscreet statements to writers and reporters.

Granted, Reagan never knew anything about the Carter briefing materials.

Granted, Carter played campaign politics as cynically as his aides' worst insinuations about "debategate," with his charges that Reagan was racist and his manipulation of the hostage crisis to help defeat Sen. Edward Kennedy.

Granted, the concerns of William Casey and top Reagan campaign aides that Carter would again manipulate the hostage situation to win the election were totally justified.

Granted, each time Dan Rather and his colleagues on the other networks report the story they seem to do it with ever more zest.

Granted, there were far more important questions to ask at the presidential press conference last week.

Let's assume Reagan is right about each of the above. So what?

As John Kennedy said about the draft and as Jimmy Carter said about Medicaid abortions for poor women, life is unfair. And no one's life is more unfair than the president's.

With all the problems they face, most American presidents have had to deal with some touch of scandal, even when they had nothing to do with it. Dwight Eisenhower had Sherman Adams. Lyndon Johnson had Bobby Baker.

How these presidents handled their problems had more to do with their presidencies than the way the problems were resolved. Eisenhower let Sherman Adams go into exile in New Hampshire. Johnson let the criminal justice system work its way until Bobby Baker went to jail.

Ronald Reagan must be mad as hell. There's no question that he would have been elected president overwhelmingly, even if his aides had never seen one page of Carter campaign materials. The fact that Speaker Tip O'Neill agrees publicly makes the situation even harder to take.

But the issue is not whether the situation is fair to Reagan, or whether the behavior of ex-Carter aides and some Democrats and the pack mentality of the press are outrageous. What's important to Reagan, the presidency and the country is what he does now.

Fortunately for us, the interests of the president and the interests of the country coincide. Ronald Reagan's course of action seems clear: he should tell the attorney general to seek court appointment of a special prosecutor.

Given the recent history of the presidency, the consuming interest of the media and the smell of blood among some Democrats, no investigation by Reagan's attorney general or even the FBI working under him will be seen as being honest and objective. In Reagan's predicament, candor rendered is candor perceived. More than most recent presidents, Reagan seems to understand this.

The need for a special prosecutor has nothing to do with the integrity of FBI Director William Webster, which is beyond reproach, or with the professionalism of Attorney General William French Smith, which is unquestioned. It has everything to do with the facts Ronald Reagan has been slapped in the face with and whether he can accept them.

My own instincts are that our country would be far better off if Congress and the press would spend more time in searching coverage of the ravages of drug abuse, the plight of prison inmates, Pentagon waste, the indignities to which we subject millions of senior citizens in nursing homes, health care costs, race discrimination, the graying of America, the financial crisis of The Third World, etc., etc.

But we do not live in Thomas More's Utopia. We live in these United States in the 1980s.

Our best hope of clearing the air, restoring some balance to press coverage of the grave issues that face us in Washington, and freeing up the president and his top aides to fulfill their important public obligations to govern America is to get the facts out credibly and promptly. Only an independent special prosecutor can do that for the president and the country.

Whether Ronald Reagan can accept the unfairness of the situation he's in and squarely confront it by asking for a special prosecutor will tell us a lot about how much he has learned about being president.

The writer, a Washington attorney, was President Johnson's top domestic aide from 1965 through 1969 and was Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare from 1977 to 1979.